

Books for Tiny Tots

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Adults often feel that tiny tots are too young to enjoy books. Experience shows, however, that children are never too young for books and they easily learn to enjoy them. If they are introduced to suitable books early in life, the children are not only enabled to develop their sense of curiosity and desire for gaining knowledge but come to love books, which promotes reading habits as they grow up. Elaine Moss writes in her essay on reading enjoyment with 2 to 5 year olds, "A child's own book is something he shares with his parents, something that lives in his room, something he can have in bed when he is alone or can commune with whenever he feels sad.books for the very young can be expensive confidence tricks, or they can be worth a hundred fancy toys." She further writes, "The child brought up on picture books and nursery rhymes will, by the age of four enjoy hearing a story with-

out looking at pictures. These give the listener experience in hearing words and forming his own images from what is read to him, an experience which is immensely valuable. He is to explore new worlds, but he cannot reach these worlds on his own."

An adult plays a very important role here. He is the selector of book and he is the one who reads to the child and he is also the one who promotes the love of books among the tiny tots.

The literature for very young children is a specialised segment of the juvenile book field. Writing, illustrating and publishing books for tiny tots is much more difficult than working for any other age group. Deceptively simple in content and appearance, it is one of the most difficult arts that needs special aptitude, keen perception and long practice. Even in the developed countries, there are not many books for the youngest age group.

The Young audience

Tiny tots have their own personality and unfortunately not many adults succeed in acquiring the skill to see their colourful world through their eyes. To enter their world, the writer, illustrator and the editor must enter his own childhood first and slowly train himself to understand the world of children, their likes and dislikes. "Be a child to reach the child." The American writer Lee Wyndham even suggests, "Get down to the child's eye-level, physically squat, kneel, sit, lie down flat on your back or your stomach and see what he does."

Anyone wishing to work for this age group must know the requirements of this audience. The span of this group is from two to five years and it is interesting to note that the children during this age grow very fast and change from year to year. A two or three year old child can be attentive only for three to five minutes and his world is limited to his immediate family and home. Even a large and clear illustration with a caption is sufficient as a page for his book. A three or four year old can only grasp the text drawn from a limited vocabulary and not exceeding more than five hundred words. His attention span could be five to seven minutes. The four or five year old child's world is wider and he has grown rather inquisitive. With the age his retention power increases and his retention time could be five to ten minutes. He can understand a little complication in the story plot and a relatively more difficult text.

In general, young children live in the present, a little before "now" and a little after "now." the distant past and distant future have little meaning for them and don't interest them. This age is the look-'n-listen-'n-learn-'n-enjoy age.

The best language for this age group is either the child's own mother tongue or the

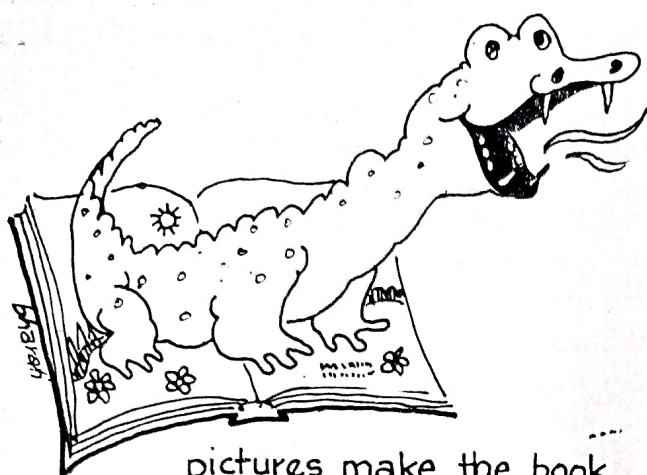
language widely spoken around him; in other words, the language which the child is able to understand. Since tiny tots recognize things before they can name them, illustrations play a very important part in their literature — hence the young child's satisfaction in looking at pictures of common-place objects like a dog, cat, cow, parents, grandparents and anything that is familiar to him and forms part of his little world.

Children of this age are an impatient audience. They have limited capacity but they love childlike ideas. Animals, particularly baby animals and pets, are special favourites with them. They love simple humour, drama and action in their stories. Simple fantasy stories of personified animals who speak like humans and also dress like them are loved by these "readers". They also like simple stories based on their everyday experience, especially where the main character achieves a clear goal. Very short stories with uncomplicated plots are most suitable for them.

Little boys are gentlemen in the making and little girls are women in the making. By nature the girls like to play with dolls and behave like their own mothers, while the boys love to have fights and for this reason like to read "bang bang" stories. But all children love happy endings. Since they themselves want to feel protected and secure, they want the same thing in their books. At the same time, as Jane Yolen says, "The children in the audience do not lack judgement. They are excellent critics, often quite brutally outspoken since they have not been 'civilized' out of twitches, boos and yawns. But a book is more than a book to a child, and a writer of books for children must not ever forget it."

Books for tiny tots can be divided into the following types:

First books are just clear pictures, with



pictures make the book
come alive...

captions. Pictures of familiar objects are the most suitable material for these first books. There is not much scope for experimentation for the writer and the illustrator here for first books are more like toys, where the illustrations depicting life-like objects could be compared directly with the real thing to let the infant make a connection between object and image. With very limited text, the illustrator is the major contributor in the production of these books. Besides, the material used for printing the first books is also specially selected so that it can bear rough handling. Cardboard, cloth or plastic-coated thick paper are often used for the purpose.

Books for pre-school children

The challenge for the writer and the illustrator starts here, when the book grows beyond a mere toy and gives the first taste of a real book. The text is important, the pictures more imaginative and the choice of subjects is wide. For example,

- Nursery rhymes, nonsense rhymes, simple four-line rhymes and tongue twisters;
- songs, play-songs;
- short story rhymes, long poems telling stories;

- stories, simple fantasy, dressed up animals and real animal stories;
- read-aloud stories, fairy tales and fables;
- simple non-fiction and information books;
- simple humour or jokes;
- alphabet books, number books and concept books.

The books for pre-school children are either read-aloud books or books for the beginning readers. The read-aloud stories offer a wonderful opportunity for both the author and illustrator. The presence of an adult who reads the story to the child makes up for the child's inability to read the text.

After a few readings by an adult, the child listener, remembers the text by heart and then, even when he is alone, he turns the pages and chants the text while enjoying the pictures. Reading to children is a necessary and important aspect of making the child a future reader of books. Read-aloud stories are generally short and are read by adults to children. These stories are heard and enjoyed and mostly the young listeners pay more attention to the story-teller than the book itself. But often they like to look at the illustrations and relate with them and quite often the illustrations compel the young viewer to own the book. On the other hand, the comprehension and vocabulary of the children being limited, the beginning-reader books impose very severe restrictions on the language used as also on the plots and illustrations.

The writer must observe some other restrictions, however. For example, in books for young children there is no place for morbid ideas, cruelty, adult humour, long narrations and didactic style, hatred and discrimination based on caste, creed, colour or sex.

Since illustrations predominate in books for tiny tots, these books provide great

opportunity to illustrators. Illustrations evoke children's involvement and create in them a feeling of participation. A picture with emotional appeal lingers in the minds of the young readers. Once I had the chance to read some beautiful books with a very young audience and I recall how a little girl loved to see again and again a picture where a small boy carried a baby bear in his arms. It is very necessary therefore, that the picture books should carry illustrations with a high degree of childhood appeal. Unimaginative and drab illustrations hardly give any emotional happiness to a tiny tot. At the same time the artists should put aside "great" art if they are illustrating for first books, which is a highly specialised art and not a form of mere decoration.

At the second-stage, the slightly older child has already crossed the stage of relating an object with its image. Since his imagination has widened, he wants to see more than just clear and realistic pictures. Here the artist can even experiment with the caricature style, though he can never leave the realm of the realistic world. Even though an animal may be dressed like a human, his physical features should remain those of the animal—a bear must stay a bear and a jackal, a jackal. Children love pictures filled with

action. The art of illustration begins to meet its challenge with the second stage books where the illustrations become more meaningful and are accompanied by a longer text.

Often artists think that the use of several colours is a must for these books but experience shows that the use of just one or two-colour illustrations could also do wonders. But, again the strength of the illustration depends on the talent and imagination of the artist. Often bold lines and action-oriented illustrations produce more emotional appeal than drab four-colour illustrations.

Judging the books

The books for tiny tots should be selected and judged for

- overall effectiveness;
- clearness of control idea;
- originality;
- aesthetic quality;
- tiny tot appeal.

So far very little has been published for the very young in India. They need our special care and attention. Many more writers, artists and publishers must come forward to produce special picture books to cater to this age group.

"We live, in fact, in the time of the anti-hero, and that is a sophisticated concept—much too sophisticated for childhood. Even worse, it robs a child of hope—where there is hope, there is need for heroes to make that hope a reality, for ordinary flesh and blood heroes with whom the reader can identify. To deny one is, therefore, to deny the other; and, if one does so, if one presents a world without hope, what's the point of keeping children alive?—It is only in heroes that the dream can come true.

—Mollie Hunter